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Policy issues

Follow-up to and implementation of the outcomes of United Nations summits, in particular the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development and major intergovernmental meetings of relevance to the United Nations Environment Assembly

Implementation of Governing Council decision 27/2

Report on the implementation of decision 27/2: contributions by the regional ministerial environment forums

Report of the Executive Director

Summary

The present report provides information on the implementation of paragraph 15 of decision 27/2 of the Governing Council of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), which stresses the importance of regional ministerial environment forums for which UNEP serves as the secretariat and invites those forums to contribute to the work of the governing body of UNEP. The report gives a brief overview of the engagement by UNEP with regional ministerial forums and their contribution to the United Nations Environment Assembly.

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I. Background

1. The present report has been prepared pursuant to decision 27/2 of the Governing Council of UNEP, which seeks to implement paragraph 88 of the outcome document of the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, "The future we want", and specifically paragraph 15 of that decision, by which the Council stresses the importance of the regional ministerial environment forums for which UNEP serves as the secretariat, and invites those forums to contribute, as appropriate, to the work of the governing body of UNEP. It covers progress in the implementation of the decision since the twenty-seventh session – the first with universal membership – of the Governing Council/Global Ministerial Environment Forum, in February 2013.

2. Since many of the environmental challenges faced today are not confined to national boundaries, they require collective action by member States at different levels, including regional and subregional. The importance of sustainable development at the regional and subregional level is explicitly recognized in the outcome document of the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, "The future we want".

3. Regional ministerial environment forums play a critical role in consensus-building and decision-making with regard to the environmental dimension of sustainable development, and support the establishment of linkages between regional and global environmental agendas. The forums also provide valuable opportunities for member States to draw attention to national, regional, interregional and global environmental challenges and priorities and their linkage with sustainable development. They discuss and review emerging issues and identify opportunities for South-South and triangular cooperation. In essence, these forums act as platforms for member States to prepare and build common positions in their various regions, for instance for the United Nations development agenda beyond 2015, the sustainable development goals, and the integration of environmental sustainability in those regions and subregions.

4. The strategic approaches to such integration also include partnerships with sectors beyond the environment and coordinated actions within the United Nations system which will contribute to the outcomes sought by the United Nations Environment Assembly. To this end, the forums have deliberated and reached consensus on key environment and sustainable development issues that will be discussed during the first session of the Assembly, such as sustainable consumption and production, the sustainable development of small island developing States, and chemicals and waste. The nineteenth session of the Forum of Ministers of Environment of Latin America and the Caribbean represents a good example of such an event.

5. The outcomes of these forums inform efforts by UNEP to plan its future programmes of work and medium-term strategies, providing bottom-up inputs into those processes and ensuring that the priorities of all regions are addressed and prioritized in terms of follow-up and implementation. Thus, during the 2012–2013 biennium, engagement by UNEP with regional and subregional ministerial forums was anchored in the environmental governance subprogramme of its programme of work, in particular output 6 of its expected accomplishment (a): "Effective policy exchange on environment and development issues is supported through regional ministerial and other intergovernmental forums and consultations"; and output 4 of its expected accomplishment (c): "Regional and subregional institutional arrangements are further developed and strengthened to address transboundary environmental issues". In this context, UNEP provided the requisite secretariat services and financial and technical support, and also facilitated the convening of the forums. Furthermore, in the preparation of the medium-term strategy for 2014–2017, the analysis of regional environmental priorities as expressed by relevant regional forums represented one of the key ways of incorporating regional priorities in the overall strategic direction to be followed by UNEP.

6. The priorities were fed into the design of the medium-term strategy and the subsequent development of the programme of work for 2014–2015 and incorporated into relevant subprogrammes. Dedicated outputs aiming at strengthening the engagement of UNEP with regional forums were included, for instance, as stated in output 3 of expected accomplishment (c) under the subprogramme 4, environmental governance: "Support provided to effective policy exchange and political dialogues on environment and development issues through regional and subregional ministerial and other intergovernmental and multi-stakeholder forums and mechanisms", and in output 6 of expected accomplishment (a), which addresses institutional arrangements for the governance of shared natural resources and transboundary environmental issues.

7. Strengthening of the regional presence of UNEP, as called for in paragraph 88 (g) of "The future we want", including the establishment of subregional offices, will further enhance engagement by UNEP with regional and subregional ministerial forums and other regional bodies, including

through the sharing of evidence-based environmental information and the raising of awareness on emerging priority environmental issues that are likely to inform the deliberations not only in the United Nations Environment Assembly, but also in other relevant forums. Such modalities as South-South and triangular cooperation, and also the sharing of lessons learned and good practices across regions, will constitute important elements of this process.

8. Currently, UNEP serves as the secretariat of the following ministerial environmental forums: African Ministerial Conference on the Environment; Health and Environment Strategic Alliance; Subregional Environmental Policy Dialogue of Asia and the Pacific; Regional Forum on Environment and Health in South-East and East Asian countries; and the Forum of Ministers of Environment of Latin America and the Caribbean. UNEP provides, where appropriate, administrative and logistical support to the forums and their monitoring mechanisms (intersessional meetings); financial support by facilitating the participation of some member States, paying for consultancies, and providing other forms of support. UNEP also provides financial management of the trust funds of some regional forums, such as the AMCEN trust fund, and the trust fund for the Environmental Training Network of the Forum of Ministers of Environment of Latin America and the Caribbean. In addition, it provides technical and substantive support and prepares relevant background information to enable the forums to consider and take informed decisions. Furthermore, together with the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia and the League of Arab States, UNEP forms part of the joint secretariat of the Council of Arab Ministers Responsible for the Environment.

II. Progress in work with the regional forums for which UNEP serves as secretariat

A. Africa

9. The African Ministerial Conference on the Environment (AMCEN) was established in 1985 with the aim of providing guidance and direction on environmental issues in the African region. UNEP, through its Regional Office for Africa, serves as the secretariat of AMCEN and supports Africa in diverse fields such as desertification, climate change, green economy, law and institutions, chemicals management, sustainable consumption and production, and also in developing common African positions on the global environment agenda. During the reporting period, UNEP has supported AMCEN in developing a common understanding of how African countries could engage and contribute to the United Nations Environment Assembly. During the fifth special session of AMCEN, held in Gaborone in October 2013, AMCEN adopted a decision calling for strengthened coherence and increased engagement between the diplomatic missions of member States in Addis Ababa, Geneva, Nairobi and New York on sustainable development matters. It mandated the African group of the Committee of Permanent Representatives to UNEP to prepare and promote a common strategy for Africa's engagement with the Assembly. The decision also called upon African countries to ensure and promote the active participation of all relevant stakeholders, major groups and the private sector, especially from developing countries, drawing on the best practices of and models from other institutions and processes with the aim of achieving wider consultations, effective engagement and transparency in the work of the Assembly, with due regard for its intergovernmental character.

10. UNEP also supported AMCEN in developing regional flagship programmes (clustered in five thematic areas, namely: green economy, sustainable consumption and production, integrated environmental assessment, energy, and sustainable land management, in addition to related cross-cutting areas), as a means of contributing to effective implementation in Africa of the outcomes of the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development. The regional flagship programmes were identified on the basis of the outcome document of the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development. To date, draft concept notes have been developed for the respective flagship programmes, together with a draft framework document for the regional flagship programmes. At its fifth special session, AMCEN adopted a decision calling for the establishment of a steering committee within the Planning and Coordinating Agency of the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), to guide the overall coherent development and implementation of the regional flagship programmes. As a member of the steering committee, UNEP will continue to support preparation of the full programme documents of the regional flagship programmes and their subsequent implementation.

11. The Health and Environment Strategic Alliance (HESA) was created as a follow-up to the first Interministerial Conference on Health and Environment in Africa, held in Libreville in 2008, at which ministers of health and environment adopted the Libreville Declaration on Health and Environment in Africa, aimed at catalysing policy, institutional and investment changes required to reduce

environmental threats to health. UNEP and the World Health Organization (WHO) provide secretariat services for HESA. To ensure effective implementation of the Libreville Declaration, countries emphasized the need for relevant and up-to-date information. In this regard, UNEP, together with WHO and other partners, collaborated to produce the third report in the Africa Environment Outlook series (AEO-3), focusing on health and environment interlinkages. The report was launched on 17 October 2013 during the fifth special session of AMCEN. The report offers a range of policies designed to tackle the health and environmental challenges, and highlights opportunities and synergies that might be derived from intensified collaboration between the two sectors.

B. Asia and the Pacific

12. The Subregional Environmental Policy Dialogue (SEPD) is a UNEP-led initiative that canvasses views on global environmental issues from the regions of Central Asia, North-East Asia, South Asia, South-East Asia, and the South Pacific, with a view to preparing a consolidated Asia-Pacific perspective of those issues. Through the Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific, UNEP serves as the secretariat for SEPD, which covers all the subregions. SEPD provides a forum for the discussion of global issues and the provision of regional inputs to global events, such as the United Nations Environment Assembly, multilateral environment agreements and the United Nations development agenda beyond 2015, among others, and for the provision of advice and policy guidance to UNEP programmes in the Asia and Pacific region.

13. During the reporting period, and jointly with the Ministry of Environment of Cambodia, UNEP organized the tenth meeting of SEPD, held in Phnom Penh on 19 September 2013. Ministers, intergovernmental organizations, eminent personalities, civil society leaders and United Nations representatives from the four subregions (North-East, South, South-East and Pacific) of the Asia and Pacific region attended the meeting. UNEP prepared the background documents for the meeting and made relevant presentations. The meeting discussed emerging environmental issues in the region and crafted strategies for a regional response to strengthen environmental governance in the light of the post-2015 development agenda and the sustainable development goals, advancing the green economy and the 10-year framework of programmes on sustainable consumption and production, and the implementation of the UNEP programme of work and the follow-up to the outcomes of the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development.

14. The Ministerial Regional Forum on Environment and Health in the South-East and East Asian countries is a cross-sectoral political initiative that brings together national policymakers from the environment and health ministries of member countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and China, Japan, Mongolia and the Republic of Korea. It is serviced by a joint WHO and UNEP secretariat. The third Ministerial Regional Forum on Environment and Health was held on 9 and 10 September 2013 in Kuala Lumpur. The event was hosted by the Government of Malaysia and opened by the country's Prime Minister, with participants from ministries of environment and of health from South-East Asia, in addition to representatives of other relevant international organizations. The Conference adopted the Kuala Lumpur Declaration, in which governments entered into a commitment, among other things, to develop an environment and health capacity-development programme, to strengthen transboundary and cross-border cooperation, and also to strengthen national environment and health action plans.

C. Europe

15. In April 2013, UNEP was requested to provide secretariat services to the planned Pan-European Biodiversity Platform, which evolved from the former Pan-European Biological and Landscape Diversity Strategy. The Platform is expected to be formalized in 2014 and will support implementation of paragraphs 14 and 15 of UNEP Governing Council decision 27/2 and paragraphs 1 and 2 of decision SS.XII/3. The Pan-European Biodiversity Platform will serve as a strengthened regional voice in key international initiatives, such as meetings of the conferences of the parties to multilateral environmental agreements, the Intergovernmental Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services, the Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity (TEEB), the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the Green Economy initiative and Principle 10 of the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development (on the enforcement of environmental laws). The Platform will help disseminate regionally tailored information about how global decisions and initiatives are relevant to the entire continent of Europe. For all priorities, objectives and actions, the ultimate goal will be to help build countries' capacities to tackle environmental degradation, promote the sustainable use of natural resources and the integration of environmental considerations into key sectors, including water, agriculture, nature conservation, and forest management. The Platform will also have the function of strengthening environmental information systems and governance to promote a transition to a greener economy, including through more sustainable consumption and production.

D. Latin America and the Caribbean

16. The Forum of Ministers of Environment of Latin America and the Caribbean is the region's most representative and long-standing political gathering on environmental policies and responses, as established by the environment ministers of the region in 1985. Through the Regional Office for Latin America and the Caribbean, UNEP provides secretariat services for this forum. During the reporting period, UNEP supported the intersessional meeting of the Forum, held in Quito on 2 and 3 April 2013. The Forum discussed the new scenario of governance for sustainable development, including ways to strengthen it, and reviewed the Latin America and the Caribbean Initiative for Sustainable Development within the context of the processes launched at the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development. The nineteenth meeting of the Forum of Ministers of Environment of Latin America and the Caribbean took place in Los Cabos, Mexico, from 11 to 14 March 2014. At that meeting, the Forum facilitated ministerial dialogues on the first session of the United Nations Environment Assembly, follow-up to agreements reached at the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, the United Nations development agenda beyond 2015, the sustainable development goals and cooperation on climate change, biodiversity and chemicals and wastes. The outcome was the Los Cabos Declaration, which confirmed the critical role of the Forum of Ministers in the political and policy dialogue to establish and identify regional priorities in preparation for the meeting of the United Nations Environment Assembly. The Forum also reiterated the importance of strengthening the UNEP regional and subregional offices.

17. UNEP also supported the meetings of the working groups and networks established by the Forum of Ministers, namely: the Working Group of the Latin American and Caribbean Initiative for Sustainable Development on Indicators; the Regional Network of Experts on Atmospheric Pollution; the Environmental Training Network; and the Regional Council of Government Experts on Sustainable Consumption and Production. These groups and networks meet during the year to feed into the process of the Forum by presenting proposals, recommendations and action plans for approval by the ministers. The Regional Intergovernmental Network of Experts on Air Pollution met in Mexico City from 28 to 30 October 2013. In accordance with the mandate of the Forum of Ministers of Environment of Latin America and the Caribbean at its eighteenth meeting, held in Quito in February 2012, a draft regional intergovernmental plan of action for Latin America and the Caribbean, on cooperation in the field of air pollution, will be submitted for consideration and possible adoption.

E. Western Asia

18. The Council of Arab Ministers Responsible for the Environment is the regional mechanism responsible for maintaining coordination and cooperation among Arab countries in all matters related to environment and sustainable development and is part of the League of Arab States. UNEP supports the Council and its programming arm, the Joint Committee on Environment and Development in the Arab Region, in which UNEP, through the Regional Office for Western Asia, forms part of the joint secretariat alongside the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia and the League of Arab States. Over this period, UNEP supported discussions on follow-up to the outcomes of the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development and the United Nations development agenda beyond 2015, and possible regional initiatives to complement the elaboration of the sustainable development goals. In 2014, together with the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia and the League of Arab States, UNEP supported regional preparations for the high-level political forum in July 2014.

III. Regional forums for which UNEP is not the secretariat but still provides support

19. While the present report concentrates on forums for which UNEP provides secretariat services, there are other equally important UNEP-supported regional and subregional environmental forums which inform and contribute to the UNEP programme of work, as well as the agenda of the UNEP governing body.

20. In Africa, UNEP has supported the African Ministerial Council on Water (AMCOW) in providing political leadership, policy direction and advocacy in the provision, use and management of water resources for sustainable social and economic development and the maintenance of African ecosystems, and the Conference of Energy Ministers of Africa (CEMA), for whose meetings UNEP provides technical inputs and expertise.

21. In Central Asia, UNEP supports the Inter-State Commission for Sustainable Development in its efforts to coordinate and manage regional cooperation on environment and sustainable development in the countries of Central Asia, and also to implement the obligations of the Central Asian States under environmental conventions of a transboundary dimension.

22. In Asia and the Pacific, UNEP is assisting the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, which provides secretariat services to the Ministerial Conference on Environment and Development, in assessing the state of the environment, formulating actions in response to imperatives posed by important global forums, and synthesizing regional perspectives, priorities and forward-looking agendas. It provides technical inputs and policy support to the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation and it is also assisting the South Asia Cooperative Environment Programme (SACEP) in supporting the protection, management and enhancement of the environment in South Asia. UNEP also provides support to the secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme (SPREP), based in Apia, which is its leading partner in tackling the subregion's priority environmental issues, including climate change, biodiversity and ecosystem management, waste management and pollution control, and environmental monitoring and governance.

23. In Europe, UNEP is also working closely with the secretariat of the Environment for Europe process, which is provided by the Economic Commission for Europe. The Environment for Europe process is the only pan-European ministerial environmental forum that provides a high-level platform for stakeholders to discuss, decide on and join efforts in tackling environmental priorities and to increase economic competitiveness and social stability. UNEP provides technical inputs, background papers and expert advice, in particular for the development of agendas. UNEP also provides technical inputs to the European Environment and Health Process, which set clear targets to reduce the adverse health impacts of environmental threats, and to oversee implementation of the commitments made by ministers in respect of policies and actions focusing on the health and wellbeing of children, and of other cross-cutting issues.

24. In the Gulf region, UNEP supports the Gulf Cooperation Council environment initiative, by contributing to subregional activities and providing technical and capacity-building support.

25. In Latin America and the Caribbean, UNEP provides relevant background information and technical assistance to such bodies as the Central American Commission on Environment and Development; the Forum of Ministers of Environment of the Southern Common Market (MERCOSUR) and its Technical Subgroup 6 on Environment; the Council for Trade and Economic Development of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) in its efforts to tackle environmental and sustainability issues; the Ibero-American Forum of Ministers and its Network of Climate Change Offices; and the Council of Ministers of the Mesoamerican Strategy for Environmental Sustainability. UNEP also provides expert advice to the regional forums of the small island developing States in assessing implementation of the Programme of Action for the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States and the Mauritius Strategy for the Further Implementation of the Programme of Action, and in preparing for the Third International Conference on Small Island Developing States.

IV. Enhanced contributions by the regional forums to the United Nations Environment Assembly

26. Regional and subregional ministerial forums form a critical part of global governance on environmental sustainability, and their contribution in terms of facilitating consensus and action will add significant value to the United Nations Environment Assembly, including by contributing to the formulation of its session agenda, and follow-up to its decisions and resolutions. This can be achieved in various ways, as set out below:

(a) Regional ministerial environment forums have a significant role in not only articulating environmental sustainability issues at the regional and lower levels, but also influencing international action, contributing to a coherent legal and institutional framework and integrated policy responses critical to effective and balanced implementation of the three dimensions of sustainable development;

(b) Ministers of environment in different regions can declare and confirm that regional forums constitute highly relevant platforms for political and policy dialogue to establish and identify regional environmental priorities, and to set strategies and regional environmental agendas that can be brought to the attention of the global environment gathering – the United Nations Environment Assembly;

(c) With expert assistance from the UNEP secretariat and its strengthened regional offices, regional forums can align their meeting schedules and agendas with the United Nations Environment Assembly in order to achieve synergies and create enhanced opportunities for linkages between global and regional environmental agendas. Regional forums can include issues on the agenda of the United Nations Environment Assembly in their deliberations, so as to provide consolidated regional messages to the Assembly, and can also include the regional implementation of previous decisions of

the Assembly in their discussions. Accordingly, regional forums can be entrusted with monitoring and discussing the progress of decisions adopted by the United Nations Environment Assembly, and with reporting back to the Assembly, including on lessons learned and good practices.

V. Conclusion

27. It is the intention of UNEP, as secretariat to the regional environment forums, to continue to render support to regional forums in their endeavour to provide a platform for the building of common positions for implementation of the United Nations development agenda beyond 2015, and for the integration of environmental sustainability in regions and subregions through strategic and implementation measures and tools, including partnerships with all sectors beyond the environment and coordinated actions within the United Nations system. Regional forums will continue to contribute to the overall strategic direction taken by UNEP, and will feed in particular into the design of the medium-term strategy and the subsequent development of the programme of work, which is particularly relevant in the context of the strengthening of the UNEP regional and subregional offices, as called for in the outcome document of the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, "The future we want".